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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DRL A/S POSNER AND EUR DAS KADINOW HEAR  
CIVIL SOCIETY AND OPPOSITION CONCERNS

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Bass for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: In preparation for the Democracy Working Group, under the auspices of the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission, members of the U.S. delegation met with leading civil society representatives and opposition political leaders who expressed concerns in several areas, including that the government is pursuing reforms at the expense of democratic process, authorities are not properly implementing plea bargaining, the government is excessively influencing the media, and independent media is unable to develop and become self-sustaining because advertisers are afraid to support independent media directly. Opposition politicians expressed concern about what they viewed as a lack of democratic development and focused on the work of the electoral law working group, upcoming local elections, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the media environment.  
End  
Summary.

CIVIL SOCIETY: MEDIA FREEDOM AND JUDICIAL TRANSPARENCY TOP PRIORITIES

12. (C) On November 17, delegation co-chairs DRL A/S Posner and EUR DAS Kaidanow opened the meeting by asking each civil society representative how the GoG was performing in areas of importance to the civil society community. A/S Posner and DAS Kaidanow also asked the civil society representatives to discuss concrete ways to improve the democratic environment in Georgia. Expressing appreciation for the government's efforts to reduce corruption, and citing Georgia's improved performance in the newly released Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perception Index report, Tamuna Karosanidze of TI raised concerns that transparency was being sacrificed for speed in government reforms, asserting that the government had put democracy on hold in order to implement reforms. Karosanidze noted that the GoG could look for ways to further engage civil society whether it be in formal proceedings or informal venues. Giorgi Chkheidze of the Georgian Young Lawyer's Association (GYLA) stressed the need for legislation to protect judges from internal influence and promote transparency in both judicial appointments and disciplinary proceedings. Both Karosanidze and Chkheidze highlighted concerns about the implementation of plea bargaining, with Chkheidze stressing the need for a public education campaign on the new criminal procedure code.

13. (C) Shorena Shaverdashvili, editor of Liberali Magazine, suggested that previous USG assistance programs in the media field focused mainly on journalists. Shaverdashvili suggested that training media managers in the basics of running a for-profit media outlet would greatly improve the professionalism of managers and viability of independent media outlets. Shaverdashvili also stressed the need for transparency regarding media ownership noting specifically that the opaque nature of television ownership was not

conducive to a free and open media environment. She focused on the monopolization of funds and domination of the media environment by the political environment, noting a lack of free flowing advertising revenues, with funds going to stations loyal to the government. Lasha Tugushi, editor of Resonanzi newspaper and head of the Georgian editors' association, expanded on the importance of transparency in media ownership, stating that when changes are made in ownership it becomes particularly important to know whether there was any government influence or coercion in the process. Shaverdashvili commented that unity in the NGO community is prevented by the polarization of civil society groups amongst each other, and lack of ability to come to consensus and mutual agreement on specific issues on which to focus. She observed that when civil society organizes, results can be achieved.

#### OPPOSITION POLITICIANS: FOCUS ON LOCAL ELECTIONS AND MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS

14. (C) In the roundtable with opposition politicians held on the same day, Irakli Alasania, leader of the Alliance stressed the importance of the Tbilisi mayoral election scheduled for May 2010. Alasania stated that Tbilisi was a "polarized city, and needs a mayor elected in the eyes of society who has legitimacy." To this end, he stressed the importance of progress in the dialogue within the electoral code working group, noting that the credibility of negotiation would be undermined in the absence of progress. He specifically emphasized the importance of a 50 percent threshold to achieve the election of a mayor viewed as

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legitimate, and the selection of the head of the electoral commission and of local precinct commissions. Alasania stated that it was important that precinct officials like the secretary or deputy be an opposition party member to serve as a check on undue GoG influence in the election process. He highlighted concerns about the impact of the media environment on the local elections, alleging that all three national television channels are under heavy government pressure. Alasania also reported that for the past two months there has been tremendous pressure on businesses providing support to the moderate opposition. Former Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze, leader of Democratic Movement-United Georgia, expressed her opinion about a lack of transparency by the GoG as to how the billion dollars of pledged assistance from the USG has been spent in Georgia (Embassy note: Embassy officials have repeatedly provided her publicly available information to track the pledge. End Note). Additionally, she expressed concern regarding the unstable security environment with Russia. Burjanadze said that she had no confidence that local elections would change much in Georgia, stating that she did not know of any country where local elections have solved problems as grave as those currently in Georgia.

15. (C) Giorgi Targamadze, leader of the Christian-Democrats, expressed concern about the lack of institutional checks on President Saakashvili's authority leading to a system where effectively only one person is making political decisions. Targamadze stated that his approach was to work within the system to develop institutional checks and balances which would limit Saakashvili's authority. Alasania then asked whether the Democracy Working Group could establish a mechanism to monitor the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the 2010 elections. The discussion shifted to the November 2007 government crackdown against protesters and Imedi television, prompting A/S Posner to express his concern about a lack of public confidence that the GoG had fully and openly investigated the events and held participants publicly accountable for their actions if warranted. Targamadze stated that discussions in Parliament had gone nowhere

because the parliamentary majority had no interest in punishing these actors. Other opposition members expressed their agreement that a lack of public accounting had damaged the GoG's credibility, with Burjanadze reporting that during the opposition demonstrations this spring, two individuals had been blinded and others seriously injured, with no accountability. The government claimed they did not know their identities (the attackers were masked), but, Alasania believed that the government had "sub-contracted out." He also highlighted concerns about government surveillance and phone-tapping, to which Gachechiladze added that he no longer used his mobile phone for this reason. DAS Kaidanow concluded the discussion by asking the participants to consider the need for opposition politicians to work together in order to achieve their goals. DAS Kaidanow noted that such cooperation would provide the opposition with political leverage and stressed the importance of exercising it effectively in order to get the government to respond to opposition concerns. She ended the discussion by noting that criticism of the government was important but that finding constructive solutions to democratic shortcomings was also an essential part of being an effective political opposition.

16. (U) A/S Posner and DAS Kaidanow cleared this cable.  
BASS